

Translation: "A Radical Originality," *Occidente* No 494. June 2019

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We must celebrate the appearance among us of this excellent Argentine writer, who already enjoys some international recognition. I believe she will gain much more. She is not only a brilliant storyteller but also an tireless denouncer of dictatorial abuses—abuses that cost her dearly: the loss of her brother Gerardo, which is the central theme of the novel, the disappearance of her cousins, her own imprisonment and torture by agents of the Argentine dictatorship, and her exile.

The first thing I want to highlight is her radical originality in many of the narrative elements. Perhaps the most visible is her stylistic originality, something very rare nowadays. And it is not a kind of convoluted writing that makes reading difficult. On the contrary: it makes it easier and more enjoyable. A couple of examples: she flies from Vancouver to Buenos Aires to accompany her sick mother; upon arriving, she comments:

"Just a few hours are enough for space to anchor you in a present crammed with past, branded by it. A present that struts as if it were the only reigning one. Your English-speaking universe vanishes."

This way of narrating a return to one's hometown is so different from the usual ones that it makes the reader, I believe, see language itself—this same language we use daily without noticing it. This literary function is one I value the most. It doesn't often occur in prose, but when it does, it brings joy to reading. The quote I just cited is one among thousands that make up the novel. Another one, about León, her father:

"He holds his breath as if before an X-ray machine about to scan his sadness."

This kind of brilliance appears in nearly every paragraph.

Among the original elements is her frequent use of well-known texts—what is called intertextuality. From this comes the very title of the book, a variation on a quote (p. 82) by Fernando Pessoa:

"One day, somewhere around the end of eternity."

But there's more to the style: for example, the way she narrates boarding a plane. In a single paragraph, she combines what the protagonist experienced long ago at JFK Airport in New York with what she feels during a later boarding. In that paragraph are the dogs that sniffed passengers back then, her use of *The Four Seasons* by Vivaldi as an antidote to fear, all mixed with a present moment where officials vigilantly surround "this place where we circulate praying—without keys or flammable materials—that the checks approve us."

The narrator character is presented with the originality of not being self-praising. Of herself, she says she is: "short, nearsighted, with soccer player legs." Mentally, she doesn't flatter herself either. She acknowledges being obsessive, distracted, messy, forgetful, and almost always scared, paranoid—but with one positive trait: a constant drive to write.

Another originality lies in her treatment of sex and death. Though she has a sentimental and sexual life she doesn't hide, there are no sex scenes. What there is the narration of a beautiful romantic relationship in Canada with another exile, a Chilean, who returns to Chile after the end of Pinochet's dictatorship, only to find his country so changed he cannot bear it and goes back to Canada, where his body gives out and he dies. This death is not described—merely mentioned as an absence. The same with León, her father, who commits suicide by throwing himself off a balcony, but Nora doesn't want to see it and doesn't even want to remember where his grave is. I repeat: these deaths are simply absences for both the protagonist and the reader. This renunciation of the easy use of narrative clichés (nudity, pleasures, hospitals, deaths, funeral rites, mourning) seems to me one of the novel's many accomplishments.

An exception is the death of Sarita, Nora's mother: her illness is told, but her death is narrated only as: "I saw you die in the hospital, next to your bed, your right arm saying goodbye to the world and to me."

Despite a fundamental difference, Nora is like any of us readers when we are traveling—and she is traveling throughout the entire book. During that time, she loses many things, never recovering most of them: watches, packages, bundles of things, clothes, file folders. So many that Nora turns this habit of frequent losses into a character: María Cemepierd (a pun meaning "Maria Lost it"), her alter ego, haunted by mischievous elves. She also loses what is necessary for moving around—and just when she needs them: passport, keys, permits, addresses, and phone numbers. These things—so necessary for travel—she always recovers, though not always on time.

Her zigzagging around the world begins in Buenos Aires, from which she is expelled by the dictatorship's "guardians of order" after a week of detention, abuse, and extreme mistreatment. She then goes to Israel and later to a huge number of places: Canada, the United States, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, South Africa, Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, Bolivia, Guatemala, Brazil, Paraguay, and Chile. This endless coming and going, departing and arriving only to depart again, spans much of the book, all in an attempt to forget *that day*, the one mentioned in the title—the date her brother Gerardo was detained and forcibly disappeared. At some point, she gives up her effort to forget and accepts that the painful memory is inescapable.

And finally, one more originality: in this novel of exiles and losses, humor is very frequent.

"As you know, I'm so peaceful that the only thing I kill is time."

"The Netherlands is so democratic that four dogs climb into chairs and have conversations while four old men pet them."

This is critical humor—is *that* democracy? But humor goes beyond one-liners; nearly all travel situations are comical: schedules not followed, clueless officials, wrong answers, non-existent addresses.

In short, the novel is also a refreshing fountain of humor. A joy, ultimately, for any reader tired of bad styles, boring sex, gratuitous violence, and exhausting texts.